DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 616 CG 013 397

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TITLE Dimensions of Religious Conversion During Adolescence.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 54p.

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescence; Behavioral Science Research; *Changing Attitudes; *Emotional Adjustment; *Family Life; Personality; Personality Studies; *Psychological Characteristics; *Religious Factors; Teenagers; Young Adults
IDENTIFIERS *Conversion (Religious)

ABSTRACT

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ED170616

DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION DURING ADOLESCENCE

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ABSTRACT

Forty-nine subjects, ranging in age from 15 to 26, were interviewed to determine the nature of the relationship among religious affiliation, religious conversion and three dependent measures: emotional stability, religious home environment and identity status. Three types of conversion were postulated: (1) gradual, a lengthy intellectual process, (2) sudden, a quick, traumatic experience and (3) developmental, a sudden, non-intellectual, non-traumatic experience related specifically to adolescent crises. The Eysenck Personality Inventory, Marcia Identity Status Interview and the Religious Home Environment Scales were used. Two way univariate and multivariate analyses of variance were performed. Step-down analyses and analyses of covariance were used to control for confounding variables. Only those hypotheses relating to the gradual conversion were statistically confirmed ($p<.05$) supporting the conclusions that: (1) Gradual converts are less neurotic, display more mature identity patterns and have more positive religious home environments than other converts. (2) Two types of conversion, gradual and sudden, predominate during adolescence. (3) Members of sectarian religious organizations are less neurotic, display more mature identity patterns and have more negative religious home environments than other converts. (4) Peer group and congregational influence play important catalytic roles in the conversion experience. Implications for adolescent psychology, psychotherapy and religious education were discussed.

DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION DURING ADOLESCENCE

Introduction

The past four or five years have seen a dramatic increase in the responsiveness of adolescents to fundamental forms of religion. This phenomonon has been extensively covered in the media (Wuthnow & Glock, 1974; Time, 1972, 1973; U.S. News and World Report, 1972), but does not yet seem to have aroused the interest of many social scientists. This neglect is the continuation of a trend which began in the mid thirties (Beit Hallahmi, 1974) and represents an unwillingness to study any experience which cannot be completely objectified or operationalized. There has been little follow up since the early part of the century on the research done by Hall (1904), Starbuck (1899), and James (1902) in the area of the adolescent religious experience. What research is currently available represents many disparate theoretical frameworks which are often contradictory.

The purpose of this study was to investigate one aspect of religion, conversion, and to develop a research design that could be scientifically rigorous, yet sensitive to the effective components of the religious experience. The following definition of conversion was employed: RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IS A PROCESS OF ATTITUDE CHANGE WHICH ENTAILS AN ACTIVE AND UNQUALIFIED COMMITMENT TO A RELIGION WHICH WAS PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN, UNACCEPTABLE OR INADEQUATELY UNDERSTOOD. Both

gradual and sudden conversions, conversion from one faith to another, and the conversion that occurs when childhood religious beliefs are modified and abstracted were studied. However, only those conversions in which religion was accepted for its own worth were examined. Conversions that could be attributed to the desire of gaining social approval or of increasing material well-being were not included.

Most previous studies (Starbuck, 1899; James, 1902; Salzman, 1953) determined that only two major forms of conversion could be identified. They included: (1) the gradual conversion, a relatively lengthy, primarily intellectual process culminated by an active assimilation of specific religious values, and (2) the sudden conversion, a process highlighted by the passive assimilation of religious values subjectively perceived to have been transmitted by a superhuman force, it follows a period of acute anxiety and distress. The former is seen as a process which promotes and accompanies emotional stability, while the latter is generally viewed as a static defense against anxieties which are created by sexual conflicts.

When these theories are empirically examined, the results are generally in conflict (Stanley, 1964; Kildahl, 1965; Spellman & Baskett, 1971; Hood, 1974). There are a number of reasons which may account for this. First, much of the research conducted recently is based on small and often biased samples. Salzman (1965) and Christiensen (1966), for example, have both drawn their conclusions from the records of clinical patients, individuals with atypically

intense neurotic anxieties. Others (Stanley, 1969; Kildahl, 1965; Hood, 1974) have studied only theological students, church-goers and pentacostals. Clearly, one cannot generalize from such samples to the wide population of converts whose religious habits and practices are more commonplace. Second, most researchers have interested themselves either in limited aspects of conversion or in trying to fit all aspects of conversion within limited theoretical structures. For instance, studies that have attempted to relate conversion to personality type include only the few variables which are of interest to the author. It is short-sighted, indeed, to attempt to show that all conversions, or even all sudden conversions, are related to Oedipal conflicts.

In an attempt to reconcile many of the conflicts in the research literature, this author suggests that the gradual and the sudden are not the only forms of conversion. Instead, it would appear that there is a third process, the <u>developmental</u> conversion which, unlike the other two, is unique to the adolescent years. This developmental conversion is an active process which is characterized by its sudden onset and an apparent lack of forethought. It is directly related to the identity crises and conflicts of adolescence (Erikson, 1962, 1968). Religion is adopted by the developmental convert not for its inherent worth but for the short term security it provides.

Nine research hypotheses pertaining to family religious life prior to conversion, and to the psychosocial and emotional states

following conversion, were established to test the assumption that three distinct forms of conversion may occur during adolescence.

Research Hypotheses

Ideally, it would be best to find a sample of adolescents on the brink of conversion, observe any changes in their behavior and values as the conversion is experienced, and determine if the speculated transformations do occur. However, since it is impossible to anticipate whether the incidence or the inception of conversion for any given individual, such research would be too lengthy, too costly, and impractical. Instead, a sample of adolescents already converted was selected. A number of hypotheses pertaining to the memories of their religious lives at home prior to conversion, and to their psychosocial and emotional states following conversion, were examined. Following are definitions of the three forms of conversion and a list of the hypotheses tested.

Gradual Conversion: It is a time-consuming process involving considerable thought and reflection. Alternative religious systems or the merits of specific values are considered before a final decision is made.

Hypothesis 1: Home Environment: A CONSTANT AND POSITIVE RELIGIOUS HOME ENVIRONMENT IS A NECESSARY DETERMINANT OF ONLY THE GRADUAL CONVERSION.

A consonant religious home environment is one in which there is parental

agreement about religious issues. Parents hold similar beliefs and emphasize the same rituals and customs in the family setting. A positive religious home environment is one in which religious observances and experiences in the home are remembered by the adolescent as being anticipated events, as enhancing family solidarity, and as creating an atmosphere of joy and contentment.

Hypothesis 2: Emotional State: ADOLESCENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED GRADUAL CONVERSIONS WILL EXPRESS ATTITUDES INDICATIVE OF EMOTIONAL STABILITY TO A GREATER EXTENT THAN ADOLESCENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED OTHER FORMS OF CONVERSION.

Emotionally stable individuals, according to Eysenck (1970) are those who under only the very greatest stress would produce neurotic symptoms and behaviors or a tendency to break down. They tend to be free of self-blame; they do not dwell on past events, and are confident, decisive, and achievement oriented.

Hypothesis 3: Identity Status: ADOLESCENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED GRADUAL CONVERSIONS WILL EXPRESS ATTITUDES CHARACTERISTIC OF "IDENTITY ACHIEVEMENT" TO A GREATER EXTENT THAN ADOLESCENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED OTHER FORMS OF CONVERSION.

Identity Achievement, according to Marcia (1966), is a psychosocial state preceded by a crisis or period of indecision in choosing among meaningful alternative life styles, and is typified by a commitment

or strong personal investment to both an occupation and an ideology.

Developmental Conversion: This is a process which involves little reflection, thought or emotionality. The individual decides to become intimately involved with the religious system almost immediately following his first contact with it.

Hypothesis 4: Home Environment: NEGATIVELY EXPRESSED PARENTAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS RELIGION ARE SUFFICIENT DETERMINANTS SOLELY OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL CONVERSION.

Negative attitudes include statements that religion is outmoded, that religious figures are ridiculous, or that religious behavior in others is childish. Such parents may occasionally participate in some religious rituals, but only to placate important others.

Hypothesis 5: Emotional State: ADOLESCENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED DEVELOPMENTAL CONVERSIONS WILL EXPRESS ATTITUDES INDICATIVE OF NEUROTICISM TO A GREATER EXTENT THAN WILL ADOLESCENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED OTHER FORMS OF CONVERSION.

Neuroticism (Eysenck, 1970) entails moodiness, indecisiveness, causeless depression and self-blame. Neurotic individuals tend to brood over the past, experience sleeplessness over trouble, have trouble returning to a normal state after emotional experiences, and complain about vague somatic upsets.

Hypothesis 6: Identity Status: ADOLESCENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED DEVELOPMENTAL CONVERSIONS WILL EXPRESS ATTITUDES CHARACTERISTIC OF "FORECLOSURE" TO A GREATER EXTENT THAN WILL ADOLESCENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED OTHER FORMS OF CONVERSION.

Individuals in this status may be characterized by their tenuous approach to establishing stable identity patterns. A "Foreclosure" subject is distinguished by not having experienced a crisis, yet displaying a commitment.

Sudden Conversion: It is a religious experience precipitated by strong feelings of sin or guilt which the individual struggles to overcome. Unable to do so, he gives up. Conversion, which occurs at this point, is characterized by sudden insights and a sense of joy and contentment. Little thought or reflection is involved. The convert sees himself as a passive witness to the will of God.

Hypothesis 7: Home Environment: A FUNDAMENTAL RELIGIOUS HOME ENVIRONMENT IS A NECESSARY DETERMINANT SOLELY OF THE SUDDEN CONVERSION.

A fundamental religious home environment is one in which all the precepts of a given religion are fulfilled in an intense yet simple manner. The commandments of the deity are observed without question or compromise. Religion is a major part of life, influencing all other behaviors. Religious conversion is a socially approved experience.

Hypothesis 8: Emotional Status: ADOLESCENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SUDDEN CONVERSIONS WILL EXPRESS ATTITUDES NOT CONSISTENTLY INDICATIVE OF EITHER EMOTIONAL STABILITY OR NEUROTICISM.

The meanings of emotional stability and neuroticism have been discussed earlier.

Hypothesis 9: Identity Status: ADOLESCENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED SUDDEN CONVERSIONS WILL EXPRESS ATTITUDES NOT CONSISTENTLY INDICATIVE OF ANY SPECIFIC IDENTITY STATUS.

Marcia (1966) described four levels of identity status which may characterize the adolescent. Two of them, "Achievement" and "Foreclosure" have been discussed earlier. A third status, "Moratorium", involves a crisis but no commitment; while the final status, "Diffusion", is the most primitive developmentally. The "Diffusion" adolescent may or may not have experienced a crisis. His hallmark is a lack of commitment.

In summary, a number of specific group differences are required to confirm the basic assumption of this dissertation - the threefold nature of religious conversion. (1) Gradual converts should have experienced more positive and consonant religious home environments, and be generally more mature and better adjusted than other converts. (2) Sudden converts should have experienced more fundamental religious home environments than other converts, and not display any particular maturity or adjustment trends. (3) Developmental converts should have attributed more negative attitudes about religion to parents, and generally be

less mature and adjusted than other converts.

INSERT TABLE 1

Method

INSERT FIGURE 1

Forty-nine young men and women, ranging in age from 15 to 26 years, participated in this study. There were 22 subjects who described themselves only as fundamental Christians, 6 Mormons, 5 Jews, 5 Hebrew Christians, 4 Presbyterians, 2 Methodists, 2 Catholics, 1 Baptist, 1 Christian Disciple of Christ, and 1 Unitarian. Each subject was categorized on the basis of three factors: sex, religious affiliation, and the nature of the conversion. Moreover, each had provided the names of two referrants who, when contacted, attributed to the subject stronger than average religious beliefs. The strength of belief, measured in terms of belief and practice, was recorded on a five point Likert scale.

The following areas relating to both the research hypotheses and the categorization schema were explored with each subject:

(1) Nature of Conversion: A card sorting task, developed and validated by the investigator, was used to determine which type of conversion had been experienced: Gradual, Sudden or Developmental.

(2) Religious Affiliation: Two scales, the Test of Religious Ideas (Franzblau, 1934) for Jewish subjects, and the Orthodoxy Scale (Putney & Middleton, 1961) for Christians, were used to assess the nature of each subject's religious beliefs. Those whose scores on either scale were above the group mean were labelled as either "Conservative Centralized" or "Conservative Sectarian", depending upon

TABLE 1

TABULAR DISPLAY OF RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS 2

Variables of Interest		Type of Conversion		
		Gradual	Developmental	Sudden
Home Environment	Fundamentalism	M	M	H
	Attitude	M	I	M
	Affect	H	M	M
	Dissonance	L	M	M
Emotional Stability	Neuroticism	L	H	M
Identity Status	Diffusion	L	M	M
	Foreclosure	M	M	M
	Moratorium	M	M	M
	Achievement	H	L	M

H - High
M - Moderate
L - Low

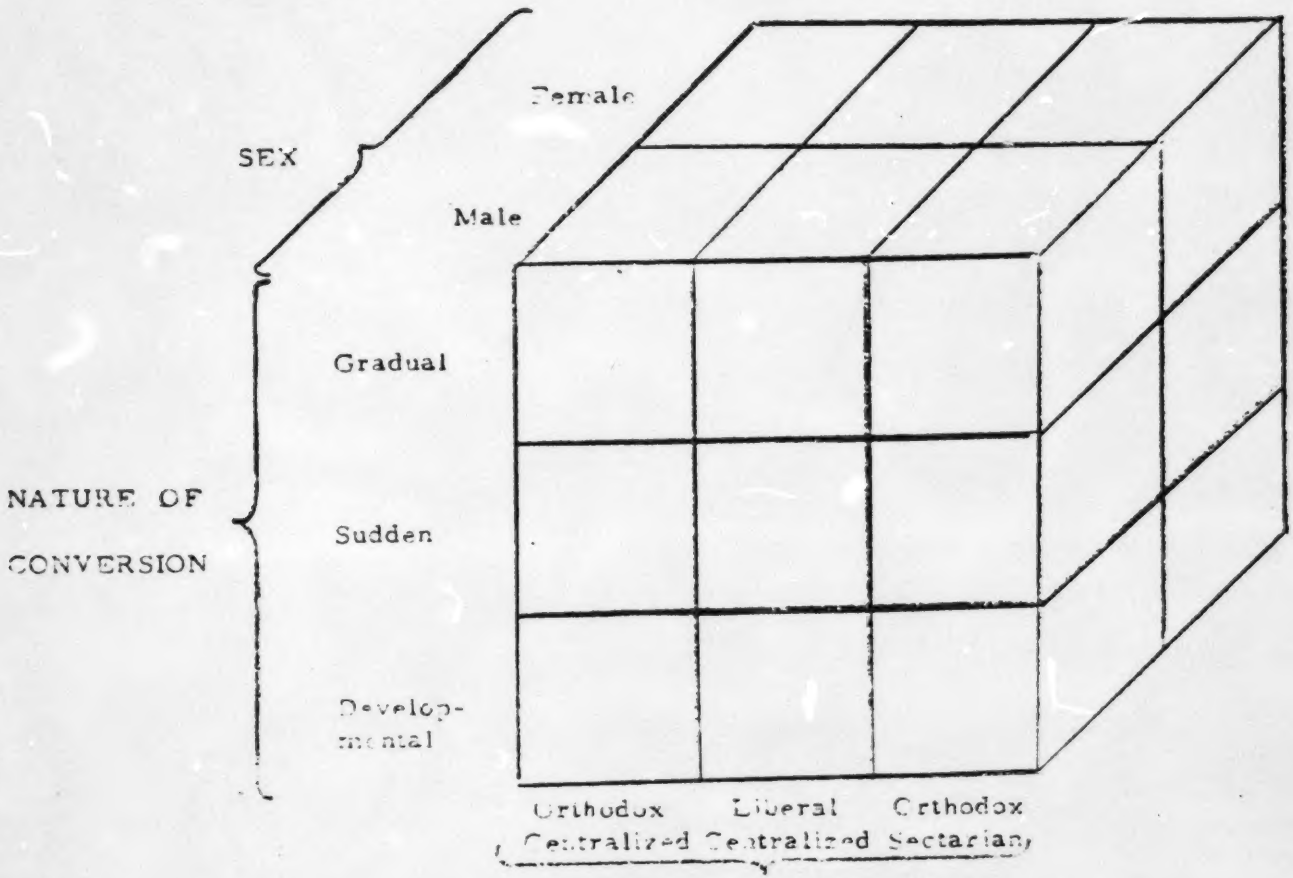

FIGURE 1

FIGURAL DISPLAY OF THE THREE FACTORS FOR WHICH SUBJECTS WERE TO BE SELECTED

the structure of the church with which they were affiliated. Those whose scores were below the group mean on either scale were labelled "Liberal Centralized".

(3) Emotional State: The Stability-Neuroticism Scale, a measure which is part of the Eysenck Personality Inventory, was used to assess the mental stability of each subject. Higher scale scores denoted neurotic tendencies, while lower scores denoted mental stability. Interspersed among these items were nine items comprising the Lie Scale, a social desirability measure. Scores of five or greater on this scale were considered suspect.

(4) Religious Home Environment: Six scales were developed by the investigator to tap selected aspects of the subjects' perceptions of their parents' religious attitudes and behavior. They included: Fundamentalism-Mother, Fundamentalism-Father, Attitude-Mother, Attitude-Father, Affect, and Dissonance. The reliability and validity of these scales was first established using a sample of 131 teenagers from five different religious backgrounds: (a) Jewish girls, seniors in an Orthodox parochial school, (b) Catholic boys, seniors in a Catholic parochial school, (c) Christian boys and girls, seniors in a public high school, (d) Jewish boys and girls, members of a non-sectarian youth organization, and (e) Jewish boys and girls, members of a Reform youth organization. An item analysis was performed to determine which items would be included in the final set of scales. Alpha Coefficients were computed as a measure of internal consistency.

They ranged from 0.942 for Dissonance to 0.671 for Attitude-Mother. Univariate analyses of variance were performed upon subject groupings to determine the validity of the scales.

(5) Identity Status: Marcia's (1966) semi-structured interview schedule was utilized to determine the identity status of each subject. Questions were designed to tap the ideological and occupational beliefs of adolescents. Each interview was recorded and later listened to by two judges to determine identity status. Each subject was assigned to one of four categories: Identity Achievement, Moratorium, Foreclosure, and Identity Diffusion.

In addition, subjects were asked to provide detailed accounts of their conversion experiences and their impressions of their religious home environments.

Results

A. Statistical

INSERT TABLE 2

The author was unable to find an equal number of subjects to fill each cell of the design. In fact, certain cells have no representation at all. Twenty-six gradual, seventeen developmental and only six sudden converts were interviewed. Moreover, no liberal developmental, liberal sudden or male centralized converts could be discovered at all.

Two-way univariate and multivariate analyses of variance were performed to determine if any relationships exist between religious conversion, religious affiliation, and emotional stability, religious home environment and identity status. Sex was discarded as a factor, when it was found to have no significant ($p<.05$) relationship with any of

TABLE 2

DISTRIBUTION OF SUBJECTS

Gradual	3	4	4	11
Developmental	2	0	9	11
Sudden	0	0	2	2
	Centralized	Liberal	Sectarian	N=24

MALES

Gradual	7	2	6	15
Developmental	2	0	4	6
Sudden	2	0	2	4
	Centralized	Liberal	Sectarian	N=25

FEMALES

the variables under study. Analyses of covariance and step-down analyses were also introduced in order to examine: (1) parental religious attitudes, when the effects of Fundamentalism were statistically controlled; (2) Dissonance, when the minimizing effects of Fundamentalism and Attitude were controlled; (3) Affect, when the effects of Dissonance were controlled; (4) Neuroticism, when the effects of social desirability were controlled; and (5) Status, when the effects of age were controlled. Inspection of the estimated mean scores of each variable for each analysis, as well as the derived mean differences and the standard errors, provided information regarding the hypotheses of specific interest to this study.

The Sudden Conversion in Adolescence

Of the nine hypotheses originally established, only the first three, those pertaining to the gradual conversion, were statistically confirmed ($p < .05$). Moreover, the consonance effect, an element of the first hypothesis, was not a discriminating factor. There is a number of possible explanations for this failure to confirm the vast majority of the hypotheses initially advances, and specifically to discriminate between developmental and sudden conversions: (1) the instruments used were not sufficiently developed or sensitive enough to distinguish adequately between the anxiety levels of sudden and developmental converts; (2) the subjects were unwilling to admit to states of deep depression; (3) the sudden conversion is not really a vital part of the adolescent religious experience and during this part of life is generally indistinguishable from the developmental.

This investigator feels that the third explanation is the most realistic. Only two major forms of conversion may be claimed to exist during adolescence: gradual and non-gradual. While earlier theorists such as Salzman (1953) stated that the sudden conversion comprises the second category, it seems more likely to be relatively rare and insignificant during adolescence. This conclusion is supported by the close similarity between the scores of developmental and sudden converts in almost all measures and by a number of area clergy who explained to the investigator that in their experience the sudden conversion is not prevalent among adolescents; it occurs most frequently among people in their thirties and forties. In fact, some of the "sudden" subjects interviewed in this study would be more aptly classified as "developmental". Following is the case of a seventeen year old girl whose story fits this qualification.

> They started telling me about the Lord...I found I couldn't pray the way they did. They gave me some literature and I read it...but I didn't really accept it. I said, 'Lord, you can come in, but you stay over there. I want to do what I want to do.' I was really interested in the occult. I needed power in my life and satisfaction. For sure I would get things my way. I read a lot, tried it out. I wanted to know my future so I could plan better. I thought about it...'Who is the right way, Lord? Who am I supposed to believe?' I was really confused for a long time. I thought they (Christians) were trying

> to brainwash me. Then I went to that (Christian) camp. It became more and more real. I really understood it. They were really nice to me, and I couldn't understand why. My friends were real jerky, but they weren't like that. People really liked me.

When this girl was questioned about the depth of her anxiety before her conversion, she responded:

> I was happy...I don't even know why. I guess it was just growing up. I didn't have anybody to identify with. All my friends...were not the open type...I had to do the things that they did that were classified as cool...and I felt bad about it because I was doing things I had been raised not to.

Her story does not include the deep despair or the total frustration attributed to the sudden conversion. It is more a reaction to the normal stresses of adolescence. This girl's perception of her anxiety may have been greater than normal, but essentially the process of her conversion was a developmental one. Similarly, a young man whose conversion occured in his early twenties stated that he had reached a point of despair during which he had decided either to commit suicide or to move to California and bake doughnuts. In his mind, the second alternative was the more likely.

Sectarian Affiliation

During the course of this study a number of other significant findings ($p<.05$) was made which relate directly to the original theoretical structure as well as to the religious experience in general. By far the most interesting results relate to the adolescents who chose to join sectarian churches. This group includes the Hebrew Christians, charismatics and evangelical Christians who have chosen to join prayer fellowships instead of more established organizations.

1. Adolescents who were affiliated with sectarian churches:

   (a) displayed significantly fewer neurotic tendencies and higher levels of identity achievement than either liberal or conventional adolescents, even when factors such as social desirability were controlled

   (b) perceived their religious home environment to be significantly more dissonant than did other subjects

   (c) attributed to their fathers significantly more negative religious attitudes than did other subjects.

The degree of emotional stability and identity achievement found to exist among these sectarian adolescents, most of whom labelled themselves simply as "Christians", was indeed startling. The power that a belief in Christ could have to dispel neurotic tendencies was totally unexpected.

Clearly, such people are not drawn to fundamental religious sects because of the example set by their parents. If anything, many of these youngsters were initially ridiculed by their mothers and fathers for their new-found faiths. Following is a sample of some of their responses to the question, "What do your parents think about your religious beliefs?"

> They think it's a lot of baloney...I'm being stupid. They know what I believe, but they don't like it and they never will.
>
> They think I'm a total fanatic...I'm going overboard... They get violent when I say anything about my conversion. My mother sometimes threatens to almost throw me out of the house.
>
> All she wants me to do is be nice to her and love her... but don't talk about it (religion).
>
> They feel like they don't like me being so dogmatic. They get upset when I tell them, 'It says right here...'
>
> Idiocy!

It may be that the very negative feelings that these parents express towards their children's religious beliefs account, in part, for their conversions. Youngsters looking for something tangible

with which to revolt against parental standards can find nothing better than a fundamental religious sect. Its values are clearly defined, it has counter-cultural overtones, its members provide needed support, and it's guaranteed to raise parental ire. When parents wonder how their sons and daughters got such "crazy ideas into their heads", quite possibly their own attitudes provided the initial impetus.

But what values are inherent in these sects themselves that make them so attractive to adolescents? A cardinal principle of such groups is that man must make his life Christ-centered. That is, he must deny personal goals or the dictates of the ego and submit himself to the will of God. A pamphlet distributed by the Campus Crusade for Christ describes three types of men: the natural man, the carnal man, and the spritual man. The natural man is controlled by his ego and self, and refuses to let Christ into his life. The carnal man has accepted Christ, but still trusts in his own efforts to live the Christian life. The spritual man, or the ultimate personality strived for by Christians, places Christ on the throne of his life, and lets God control his ego and interests. Such people do not have to worry about the outcomes of their actions or become frustrated by not meeting goals. Because God is in control, what ever happens, "it's all for the best."

The sectarian adolescents are all "spritual men". They have denied a sense of self and rely upon the will of God. For example,

a question in the identity status interview is, "how willing do you think you would be to give this up (occupational choice) if something better came along?" The majority of the individuals in sectarian groups responded that their current occupational goals are a manifestation of God's will. If God changes his plans for them, they would be more than willing to cooperate. A more extreme example follows. One young man, a sectarian convert who specializes in leading Jews to Christianity, responded in the following manner when asked about his political preferences:

> Governments of this world are not really my concern... We're called to be separate from this world, from its paganism...For me it would be wrong to go gung-ho on any political ideology...

He went on to add that he could see no need to vote in an election, since God's chosen representative will be picked no matter what man may decide to do.

It is no wonder then, that such people appear to be less neurotic than other converts. All responsibilities for their actions lie in the hands of an omniscient and benovolent God. They have no reason to worry or despair.

Sectarian groups are also highly cohesive and very supportive. Christians, as they prefer to be called, meet at least once weekly for prayer meetings. These sessions, which appear to be quite

informal, consist of personal hymns of praise to God, a lesson from the Bible, and a sharing of religious experiences. The young people are quite fervent in their prayers, clapping hands to the rhythm of the music, standing at will, and offering extemporaneous prayers to God. Almost everyone brings his own Bible to underline important passages from the lesson. Some people meet other evenings of the week in smaller units to discuss more intimate details of God's manifestation in their lives. Those who experience doubt can always turn to the group for support and a reinforcement of their beliefs. The effects temporary setbacks or hardships can have upon one's faith are thereby minimized.

Apparently, religion influences every aspect of these youngsters' lives. There is no real separation between the religious and the non-religious. For instance, a member of such sectarian groups often had decided to enter Christian work as an occupation, that is, be a missionary for Christ. When asked for whom he will vote for President in 1976, he responded, "Jimmy Carter, because he's a born-again Christian." The sectarian also has very few non-Christian friends. He embraces Christianity and, in turn, is completely embraced by it.

It is no wonder that these youngsters present profiles of "identity achievement". Their futures are completely planned. Nevertheless, this achievement is more apparent than real. While the convert may have struggled initially with religious feelings before surrendering himself to Christ, occupational and political values were accepted

conjointly without much thought. They were adopted as part of the total package. For instance, one young man, an active advocate of the Equal Rights Amendment for women before his conversion, denounced this former conviction only a short time after he received Christ. Thus, the achievement categorization noted earlier is a deceiving one. This status, which was assigned to many of these subjects, is probably not a valid assessment of identity development as a whole. It is more likely an index of the pervasiveness of their ideological commitments.

For all the negative publicity it has received, the sectarian Christian movement appears to have greatly benefited many young people. Former addicts, alcoholics, and aimless youth have been led in new, more constructive directions. Yet, theirs is a very insular and protected existence. Their jargon and knowledge of key Biblical phrases and themes defends them against external attack, as does the close personal relationships that are developed within the group. Moreover, they have little need to emerge for either occupational or social purposes. Theirs is a highly dogmatic faith with little room for question or deviation. One wonders how such people will fare when they must interact on a regular basis with the more secular world, and how well their faith can be maintained if they are cut off or forced to withdraw from the group.

Further statistically significant findings include:

2. Adolescents who had experienced gradual conversions

perceived their parents as being less fundamental and holding more positive religious attitudes than did adolescents who had experienced other forms of conversion

3. Liberal religious beliefs were held only among those adolescents who had experienced gradual conversions

These findings relate directly to the gradual conversion. They support the notion that gradual converts come from homes where religion is approached in a positive yet non-dogmatic manner. The intellectual bias of this form of conversion is further highlighted among those adolescents holding liberal beliefs.

4. A negative relationship exists between the degree of religious dissonance perceived to exist between parents and the nature of the adolescent's feelings towards his religious home environment

This final relationship confirms a finding first noted in the Religious Home Environment Scales reliability study. It supports the importance of parental religious attitudes in instilling an appreciation of, and a sensitivity to, religion in their offspring.

B. Impressionistic

While the graudal-developmental-sudden distinction is important, it became evident during the course of the interviews that not all the conversion accounts could be neatly compartmentalized into one of

three categories. Factors, such as the particular rules each sect maintained concerning conversion or specific predispositions to religion developed during childhood, blurred the boundaries between conversion types in quite a few cases. Analysis of the conversion stories yielded five additional categories of conversion which are either subdivisions of more global processes or amalgams of characteristics previously thought to be unique to the gradual, the sudden, or the developmental conversion.

(1) Within the gradual category, two processes appear to be involved. One is largely maturational and the other intellectual. Maturational converts are those teenagers who have been brought up within the church. They have experienced a rich religious home environment and have parents who are deeply involved in religion. Their conversion does not involve change but growth. As they mature, they understand more and more of the basic tenets of their faith, and, at a certain point, make a formal commitment to God. There is no abandoning of family traditions, but an increased awareness and appreciation of them. This is probably the most frequent form of conversion experienced by adolescents, and is certainly that with which most clergy are acquainted.

(2) The Intellectual convert similarly comes from a home where religion is appreciated and respected. However, this teenager is unable to assimilate the tenets of his family's faith. He is often confused by its irrationalities, and may even abandon religion tempo-

rarily. Inevitably, he returns. Sometimes, this move is precipitated by a moment of anxiety. Nevertheless, he will approach God only on his own terms. What ensues is a true intellectual process where religion is adopted to fill personal needs, whether they be spiritual, political, or social. These are the liberal converts of this study. Unlike other forms of conversion, theirs is an ongoing process. Many of them are still in the midst of making decisions concerning religion. Typifying this approach were the responses of one young woman who is currently studying for the ministry.

> I'm pretty much willing to break down all barriers... working with a whole bunch of people from different backgrounds and not showing a preference to a particular denomination...We accept everybody, nobody can quibble with our rules because we don't have any...I'm much more ecumenical trying to be a Christian in the complete sense of the word.

or the answers of a college senior, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister...

> I tend to have more of a daily relationship with God (than my parents)...without so much openness to mystical expression...What I've come to feel now is the actual written words of the New Testament are not important; its the context that's more important...I think that

> if you understand the Christian message in more of a mythical or symbolic sense, that's not to deny its reality it enhances the reality of the message, but its not a literal reality. I've decided I don't have to hassle over the historicity of the Bible. What matters most is what's coming out of the words. The life of Jesus means to me that basically everything is going to be all right...Life is...We must affirm it every way we can.

(3) Possessing characteristics of both gradual and developmental converts are the formalized and the resistant conversions. Some religious groups demand formalized periods of training and preparation from their initiates before they are permitted to become recognized members of the organization. They must study and prove that they are sincere before they can be accepted. Such converts, therefore, undergo an imposed gradual conversion even though they may have been willing to commit themselves immediately. Such conversions are particularly common among Mormons and Jews.

(4) Resistant converts experience an initial period of denial. Approached by missionaries or friends with the precepts of a new faith, they vehemently deny the validity of such teachings. They continue to maintain this antagonism until anxiety provoking situations make them particularly amenable to a conversion with developmental properties. Hebrew Christians, whose parents nurtured in

them an antipathy to Christianity, most frequently reported this type of conversion. When they were initially faced by Christian proselytizers, these Jews rigidly denied their message and attempted to refute their arguments for periods of weeks or months. One young man, currently a leader in a campus missionary organization, described his first response in this way, "...my initial reaction was 'I'm Jewish; it has nothing to do with me'...but he (the missionary) didn't let up...I kind of persecuted him, made fun of him..." A girl, a sophomore in high school, also reacted vehemently at first, "...she was handing out these booklets and I just threw them out after I read them. They made me so mad. They were so antisemitic. I was really hyper about it." Finally another girl, a freshman in college, set out initially to refute all the claims of the Jesus movement. "I got really incensed at her. I said, 'How could you believe such a myth that Jesus was the son of God? This is absurd.' ...So I went in with my Bible, armed with about fifty questions..." These people did not, however, simultaneously explore the tenets of their own faith, nor did they at this time appear to be particularly interested in the religious life. It was only later circumstances, the persistence and persuasiveness of the evangelists, peer pressure, and home or friend based conflicts, which eventually induced them to accept Christianity in the superficial manner attributed to developmental conversions. What the Hebrew Christians perceived to be a gradual, reflective process was, in fact; an "avoidance-approach" conflict, in which original

antipathies had to be overcome.

(5) Finally, there is the circumstantial conversion, which contains components of all three basic categories. Circumstantial converts have either been raised in homes where religion is important, or exposed in some other way to the basic tenets of a faith. They have, nonetheless, abandoned or denied religious ideals, being perfectly content to lead secular lives. However, a crisis of major proportions occurs in their lives. They are left anxious, without support or comfort. As a result, they turn to the religion they had previously ignored, and seek solace and comfort both from God and fellow believers. The experience of Peter is along such lines.

Peter had a similar story to tell. He had been brought up in a Baptist home. Both his parents held highly fundamental beliefs, and were active in their church. In his adolescence, Peter rejected this faith and expressed an interest in the occult. He moved out of his house, got a job after completing high school, and led an independent life. Things went quite smoothly at first, but after about a year, his world began to fall apart. He lost his job, his car's motor blew up, and he was forced to leave his apartment for lack of funds. He began to experiment with drugs, and started to smoke. He was even forced to sleep in his car at night. One day, on invitation, Peter attended a prayer meeting. At the service, he had an insight that Christ had been using this situation to lead Peter back to religion. Since that time, Peter has reaffirmed his faith and is now

optimistic about his future.

The Affective Component

Regardless of the nature of the experiences, a number of interesting commonalities may be extracted from all these conversion accounts. The first is the overt attraction that religion holds for the adolescent. Almost every individual who changed his faith, regardless of his denomination, stated that what initially interested him was the genuine sense of joy and happiness exhibited by the members of the sect. One young man, a recent convert to a Hasidic form of Orthodox Judaism, described his first contact with a Hasidic Rabbi in this manner:

> I was impressed definitely by the man's sincerity. He was a man who really believed it and lived it... Here's a man who is out and out Jewish...I had a great deal of respect for him.

Later, he went to New York and attended a Hasidic gathering to see the Rebbe, the spiritual leader of the sect.

> That was the real clincher...I didn't understand a blithering word...In those days I felt it was a holy place...I knew there was something to the Rebbe and all the Hasidim. I saw that they were human beings, alive and well in the twentieth century...It was a

> whole family thing. It wasn't a cold, formal atmosphere like the Conservative Temple...I really felt right at home.

A girl with an Episcopalian background talked about her introduction to the Church of the Mormons at a religious pageant in Elmira, New York.

> The week we were there, that was the big decision time ...another one of the really big influences was all the people...(they) were the friendliest, nicest people I had ever met. They all seemed to be so happy. I was trying to figure out why people in other religions were not so happy.

One college student who joined a fundamental Christian sect described his first contact in this way:

> I saw too many rituals in Church, too much religion and not enough God...Later, I met a lot of teenagers at Church who said they were Christians. I noticed it was a lot different...they really lived for God...they were excited about Him...they were having a really good time at it. Looking at them I decided that's what I wanted.

Subject after subject related how the religion of his childhood was cold and lifeless. Each said that people in their churches and

synagogues were more interested in structures, finances, and appearances, than in a true relation with God. Alternately, they were struck with the sincerity of the congregants whose faith they were soon to adopt, and with their willingness to make newcomers feel at home. "They all seemed to be so happy" was a phrase repeated over and over again.

The Importance of Peer Influence

The influence of peers, while not empirically evaluated, also appeared to be quite significant. Many of the subjects were strongly influenced by changes they had seen in their friends. Many of the converts talked about seeing marked changes in acquaintances who had previously been heavily addicted to drugs, self-centered, depressed, or obnoxious. These people were now joyous and had about them a sense of inner peace and contentment. They accepted everyone. Following are some examples from the protocols of two girls active in the Jesus movement:

> There was a friend in school...there was a real change in his life. He had been into the drug scene, always getting into trouble...I could see he was different, very concerned about other people. He was always carrying around his Bible and talking about Jesus...He brought me to a place called the House of Life...
>
> I met this guy, he seemed to be good...I couldn't under-

> stand what was wrong with him. He had really been 'come on, come on' before. All of a sudden, he changed. I wanted to find out what made him tick, because he just had something...he seemed to be good and care about people. One day (we were going together at the time) he took me to Church. The people were concerned about others, they were nice to each other. There wasn't the bickering and the things I'd seen in my other church.

Contacts such as these often served as the catalyst which encouraged the subjects to first attend a service, ask questions, or become involved. One subject even admitted that he was first attracted to the Christian life because of popular and pretty girls in school had recently converted and was now leading weekly Bible studies.

A Sense of Anomie

Many of the adolescents interviewed turned to religion only after they had become disenchanted with the stimulating effects of drugs and alcohol, or even after dabbling with the occult. They have embraced religion only after discovering that drugs do not always raise them to peaks of ecstasy, and that addiction can be incapacitating. Religion released them from a resulting sense of anomie.

Merton (1938) defined anomie as an inability to live up to the

the norms established by society. These adolescents are even unable to live up to any norms they establish for themselves. Finding it impossible to be successful in traditional terms, they enter a drug culture in which occupational and financial success is no longer important. It is possible to shut out the world. One need not become or do anything. However, after a time, the drugs become ineffectual for some. Moreover, they may no longer be able to resist the censure of parents and society. As a result, these youngsters must seek new supports and new havens. Religion can provide such a refuge.

Charismatic cults can be especially attractive to former addicts and social outcasts, since the transfer from drugs to Jesus culture is relatively easy. The groups are filled with smiling youngsters who seem to have no cares. Emotion is emphasized over intellect, and one can "get high on Jesus" instead of on some addicting hallucinogen. Supernatural experiences are often encouraged. Speaking in tongues, healing, and prophesy are natural occurrences in many fellowships. Most important, perhaps, is that normlessness is minimized. One submits himself to the will of God and is no longer responsible for his actions. Moreover, the convert has the support of co-believers who share his ideals and protect and bolster him in time of need.

Similarly, religion is important to such individuals because it provides a means of re-integrating societal norms which were formerly abandoned. Religion can function as a personal control against transgression, social problem behavior, or deviance (Rohrbaugh and Jessor,

1975) through four separate channels: (1) participation in religious rituals provides the adolescent with societal controls which reinforce personal controls; (2) involvement in religious teachings socializes a concern for moral issues; (3) beliefs about a deity have implications for control; and (4) emotional religious experiences generate devoutness resulting in obedience orientation.

Some recent studies have attempted to show that religion does not function to reduce anomie as has just been suggested. In fact, each study conducted in this area has failed to find any significant relationship between anomie and religion. Religious people are not any less "normless" than are the non-religious (Carr and Hauser, 1976). However, this in itself is an important finding, attesting to the strength of religion. It does not show that religion does not decrease anomie, but instead that people who approach religion are rendered just as stable as the rest of the population.

The Missionary Spirit

Finally, it would appear that recent converts, whether they be Jews or Christians, are the most ardent missionaries for their new faiths. Many of the subjects responded that, upon committing themselves to God, they felt obliged to convince their parents, their friends, and everyone they knew, that the truth lay in their grasp if only they would accept it. The author himself was the subject of more than one of these campaigns. However, most admitted that after they had been involved for a few months, their zeal to convert others

subsided, and - by most accounts - they became "easier to live with".

Similarly, Hebrew Christians often called themselves "completed Jews". Having adopted Christ as their Messiah, they were convinced that they were more Jewish than their co-religionists. Many of them actually studied Judaism, albeit from a Christian vantage point, to a greater extent than they had before their conversions occurred.

This phenomenon is explainable in terms of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1972). The new convert must be able to reconcile the fact that he has just abandoned a belief system previously considered valid, for a new one formerly assumed to be faulty. He does this by attempting to prove to former acquaintances the folly of old beliefs, and to new colleagues that he can be as zealous as they. Often there is an overcompensation. The convert must show that he can be more devout than the most devout in order to justify to himself or at least to justify his position as a member of the church. With time, some no longer see the need to prove themselves, and become more moderate in both their beliefs and actions.

While most previous studies of conversion did not place much importance on the influence of peers in making religious decisions, it became evident during the course of this study that friends, acquaintances, and the congregation often do play an important role in the dynamics of conversion. The examples set by friends or others of high social status, perceived changes in their behavior, outlook and attitudes following conversion, are frequently the catalysts which promote

an initial interest in religion. The fact that someone else has apparently managed to find an inner peace is sufficient to at least arouse the curiosity of adolescents searching for solutions to their particular conflicts.

Similarly, the social environment within the church or synagogue also appears to serve a similar catalytic function. The vast majority of the subjects interviewed, regardless of affiliation, were particularly impressed by the warmth and genuine affection conveyed by the congregants upon their first visit. They wanted to learn more and return again. Also, the support of the congregation facilitated the eventual conversion.

Implications

Modes of Parenting

The concept of conversion provided here is not limited to religion alone, but reflects the alternative coping mechanisms available to teenagers as they face the other phase specific conflicts of adolescence. Conversion is, after all, primarily seen as a reaction to anxiety generated by unresolved conflicts. The strength of that anxiety and environmental factors, primary of which are parental behaviors, determine the specific nature of that reaction.

Adolescents brought up in non-threatening settings, where differences of opinion are tolerated and parents provide positive role models, are usually able to face the doubts which arise in adolescence. These

youngsters may be equated with the gradual converts of this study. However, others resemble the developmental or sudden convert. Adolescents faced with strict, inflexible parental values and ordinances and who have not been taught to accept differences of opinion, are often unable to calmly face doubts and work out solutions. They attempt to maintain a sense of identity by totally denying one set of values and adopting another.

Implicit within this framework is a notion of the transmission of parental values. The "gradual" group of adolescents should be more likely to maintain parental values than are other teenagers. They perceive not only the structuring aspects of their parents' beliefs, but also the affective components which offer rich rewards. Other adolescents may be expected to rebel more quickly, to return only if other sets of values are too demanding or threatening.

Psychotherapy and Mental Health

Similarly, the effects of religious conversion provide a blueprint for effective therapeutic intervention. Conversion involves a God who is simultaneously all-forgiving and all powerful. He accepts the troubled adolescent and forgives his alleged "sins", making anxiety unnecessary. At the same time, He provides guidelines for self-correction and mental stability. These same methods have been used with varying degrees of effectiveness by therapists such as Rogers (1961), who advocated that the counselor provide unconditional positive regard to his clients; or Ellis (1962), who gives his clients homework to do,

telling them to try different strategies for coping with their problems.

The therapeutic effects of conversion are particularly strengthened by the group to provide needed support in times of crisis. Like other support groups, such as therapy groups, Alcoholics Ananymous, or even Weight Watchers, the members of the religious community pressure the individual not to backslide, and simultaneously reward him for any progress he may make.

A fourth component, atonement, is also available in most religious systems. Anxiety or guilt feelings can be more easily reduced or eliminated when the individual feels that he has done something tangible to make up for his wrongdoings. Mowrer (1959) made this claim when he stated that religion is conducive to mental health because it soothes a guilt-laden conscience through penance and divine forgiveness.

The therapeutic effects of conversion are nowhere seen more clearly than among the "sectarian" adolescents who were remarkably anxiety free. By receiving Christ, their sins had been forgiven; and, by living "the Word" and sharing their experiences within a community, there was no room for regression. Such people have no need to worry: Christ leads their lives, directs their future, and protects them.

Of course, these young people lead very insulated existences. All their friends are Christian, and their career goals are directed with the Christian community. They have surrendered a sense of self

in order to rely totally on Jesus for guidance and salvation. It is difficult to say how they would fare if forced to interact regularly with the "non-Christian" world.

Secondarily, despite their claims of selfless love for others, one wonders just how authoritarian and dogmatic the sectarian adolescents actually are. Future studies should include measures similar to those of Lee and Warr's Balanced F Scale (1969) or Rokeach's Dogmatism Scale (1969) in order to assess these attitudes. However, upon undertaking such a task, one must keep in mind that authoritarianism is not necessarily a negative trait. Those who declare that religious beliefs are personal and subjective deride the fundamentalists who claim that they have knowledge of "The Way". But, the fundamentalists assert in turn that their's are God given absolutes which cannot be diluted or compromised and must be shared with all men. Authoritarianism, for them, thus becomes a highly sought after way of life.

To substantiate their position, the leaders of sectarian groups claim to have had remarkable success rehabilitating former drug addicts, alcoholics, and potential suicide victims. The powers of being "twice born in Christ" are generally purported to surpass far those of any other therapeutic system. To determine the validity of this assertion, the structure of various therapeutic and non-Western belief systems must be compared with those of the monotheistic religions, and the personality traits of their respective members ought to be analyzed.

Specifically, the roles dictatorial leadership and infallibility play in social systems which vie with religion for the affiliation of the populace need further investigation. While Western religions present an omnipotent deity who has the power to offer complete and total forgiveness to the faithful, many social systems similarly venerate leaders who proclaim eternal truths which are held up to transform the world and create a "heaven on earth" for the committed. For example, Adolph Hitler, virtually omnipotent in Nazi Germany, offered his people an illustrious three thousand year Reich, a nirvana for the Aryan people, if only they would follow his orders. The leaders of the Nazi movement felt no guilt about the atrocities they committed, even when they were on trial for their lives; and thousands of Germans declared they were unaware of Hitler's crimes until after the war (Gilbert, 1950). How might Hitler's followers have responded to Eysenck's Neuroticism Scale during the first few years of World War Two, when Germany was apparently on the road to world domination? In comparing the personality traits and backgrounds of people attracted to various, totally enveloping social systems, one may very well discover that all are equally "non-neurotic".

Contemporary Populairity

Erikson (1958) stated that adolescents are particularly attracted to ideology. Politics, in a manner similar to religion, may provide the teenager with a set of values with which he can identify and which he can defend. Ideological systems also provide a kernel for the

religion can become very attractive to those young people who are faced with uncertain futures and hazily defined goals. Religious laws provide a set of norms and the religious life becomes a career in itself. Often, the church or synagogue offers modest stipends for the pursuit of religious knowledge or missionary activity. Many of the subjects interviewed in this study were completely encased by religion: they led insular lives in which all attitudes were influenced by faith, and the future was equated with serving the Lord.

Finally, the religious revival perceived among adolescents during the past four or five years may reflect a need for order now evident in the general public. In a society where trust in the government has decreased, where politicians are increasingly seen as opportunists, and moral relativism prevails, many people may find it necessary to turn in other directions for guidance. This may, in fact, partially explain the candidacy of Jimmy Carter, whose strong religious beliefs were a key campaign issue. Adolescents have a strong need for order, but simultaneously, are still flexible enough to adopt and experiment with different moral codes. As a result, they were sensitive to this loss of trust in public institutions before their parents, whose ways and ideas are more rigid and set. Some turned to drugs to escape, others to alcohol, and still others to any wide variety of religious systems which provide security, order, and a comprehensive moral code.

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It would seem that, for many of these adolescents, a religion provides only a temporary alternative. It will be maintained only as long as needs are met and peer support continues to be a stronger and more positive factor than outside pressures. Once it becomes more socially and economically profitable to conform with parental or societal norms, religion will be relegated to a secondary position or ignored completely. Religion for such people served only as a temporary haven to be later abandoned for other havens or for more mature modes of thought.

Some of these youngsters may actually "grow into" their faith developing new and keener insights. An initially defensive system may eventually evolve into a mature mode of thought. Such people will maintain their religious values into adulthood.

Finally, some adolescents may be so encased by religion that no other mode of thought is available or possible. The protection and support of the religious society are so great that the adolescent has no desire to look elsewhere. Such are the teenagers who become involved with the Hadidic communities, Chrisian Fellowship or even the Church of Reverend Moon. Geographic, ideational and social isolation imposed by strict laws reinforce group strength and solidarity.

Religious Education

The results of this study primarily point up the experiential nature of religious conversion during adolescence both at home and in the environment. Positive parental attitudes towards religion

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The Adolescent Experience

It has become increasingly clear why conversion is a "universal and normal process of adolescence" (Hall, 1904). Unlike any other system, religion provides unique solutions for many of the developmental crises of adolescence. It may offer answers to questions of ultimate meaning and promise security. It offers a stable set of norms and it provides an accepting social milieu in which conflicts can be safely resolved. Religion is so attractive to adolescents because it centralizes the problems of adolescence.

Religious faith apparently holds a different meaning for the teenager than it does for the adult. The unaffiliated adult may turn to religion after the birth of his first child or as he approaches his later years. An awareness of one's own mortality and a fear of death play prominent roles in the return to religion among people in

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their late twenties and thirties. This is apparently not the case among adolescents. Not one of the young people interviewed expressed a major concern with the after-life except as a matter of dogma. While this finding is presently speculative and must be verified through a systematic analysis of the content of adolescent religious beliefs the following statement does appear warranted: The faith of adolescence is qualitatively different from that of the adult. Young people base their beliefs on a fear of life - an inability to cope and a concern with the present - and not on the fear of death.

It follows, therefore, that traditional arguments which stress submission as the key to a fruitful after-life will have little meaning for the adolescent. The most successful campus missionary organizations appear to be well aware of this fact. The pamphlets and materials they distribute emphasize the current worth of religion and the immediate salvation belief can offer. Their's is a life rather than a death oriented approach which reflects the unique role that religious conversion plays during the adolescent years.

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